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White, William Allen

American youth and the American spirit

New York

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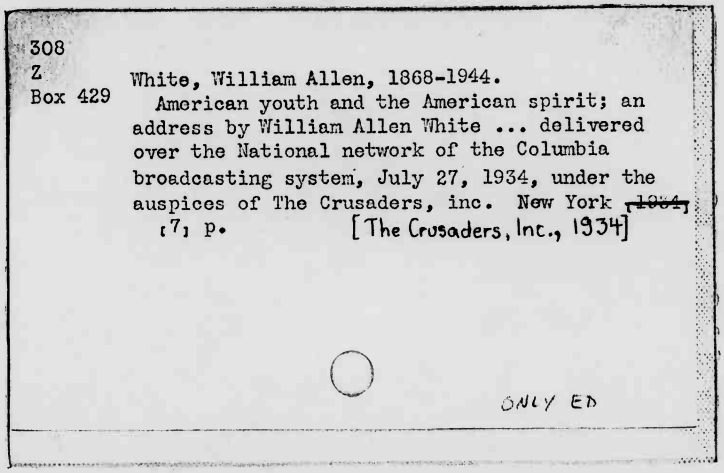
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American Youth and the American Spirit

AN ADDRESS BY
WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE
Editor, Emporia (Kansas) Gazette

308
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Box 429

DELIVERED OVER THE NATIONAL NETWORK OF THE
COLUMBIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM
July 27, 1934

Under the auspices of
The Crusaders, Inc.
100 East 42nd Street
New York City

American Youth and the American Spirit

Strikes on the western coast, bloodshed in the Mississippi Valley, turmoil and dissention in the cities of the Great Lakes, uneasiness and tension along the Atlantic seaboard. Everywhere in the land, indeed everywhere in the world, social, industrial, international peace is menaced. What does it all mean? Why should our civilization which is able to produce enough for every man to live in comfort and for every man still to have the peculiar economic rewards of his personal qualities, why is this civilization in tremor? We seem to be entering one of those transitional epochs which have shaken the world at odd times for two thousand years as inventions multiply. Gun powder produced its revolution. The printing press created a new epoch. Steam came and blew up hereditary monarchs and set its own industrial overlords in the high places. Electricity has given us a machine age, and revealed us again in that tireless quest of man, the eternal quest for justice. Something insatiable in the human heart has been struggling through the ages to express life in terms of justice. These terms change and broaden, attacking new objectives. But always they seek one thing for the common man—self-respect, freedom from tyrannies and oppressions of different sorts in different eras.

This quest for justice of old, has armed itself with many weapons. But during the last thousand years we have been struggling for the possession of the weapons of democracy, the ballot box, parliamentary government, free speech and a free press, the writ of habeas corpus, the right of trial by jury, security of property and of personal liberty. In the struggle for these democratic weapons sometimes they seem ultimate ends, not means, of the happiness that comes with self-respect.

Yet, today, eastward from the Rhine to the Pacific ocean men have thrown away these democratic weapons which have saved mankind from ancient tyrannies. There in Eastern Europe under

Fascism or Communism in its various forms, men are exalting economic security over liberty. We have there a world challenge to Democracy. In the decades before us America may be called upon to decide whether economic security is more necessary to human happiness than the thing called freedom, the thing cherished as liberty upon which the individual maintains his self-respect. Fascism in Italy, the Nazi in Germany, Central Europe, the Balkans and Communism in Soviet Russia roar back a defiant yes, declaring economic security is indeed more precious than liberty.

America's problem is to bring economic security to the common man and still cherish the weapons of democracy. The common man must always fight against the new tyrannies. Certainly bureaucracy unchecked by democracy would try to impose its will first of all upon the common man. But a little over a hundred fifty years ago, America wrote her Constitution which is now the most ancient written document governing men. It charted us on our course for more than a century and a half. It made us the land of the free, when we were the beacon and the haven of the world.

Let me read the Preamble to our Constitution, which, more than any other document sets forth the American inspiration; listen:

> "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and"
> —here is the climax—
> "Secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this the Constitution of the United States."

Here is a spiritual kingdom, a temple not made with hands. The common good, this thing called liberty which brings self-respect to the common man, is not entirely a thing of bread and butter, of warmth and shelter. It is something more precious. Our Republic was not erected chiefly to give men a full stomach and a warm back. We built this America in the wilderness for no mere material end or aim. We built it "to secure the blessings of liberty, to ourselves and our posterity." For when men are free, when they have their self-respect, their widening material needs are part of that self-respect. And until those material needs are satisfied, men remain unhappy. Hence material welfare of man, the thing that is the basis of all prosperity, is an inevitable incident of the triumph of justice, but still an incident. If we seek justice, seek self-respect for the common man, then like "the pearl of great price," all things will be added unto us. But only through democracy, not by the tyrannies of an irresponsible bureaucracy, can self-respect be held. In the struggle of the next decades here in America, the sirens of Communism and Fascism, both tyrants, will beguile us. They will tell us that force is more potent than reason to establish their new order. But when they resort to force, either the force of the general strike, or that force of the "vigilantes" outside the law who are the forerunners of Fascism—remember this: Force is the arch-enemy of democracy. No man holds his self-respect under a tyranny. Reason is the classic weapon of democracy, force the tyrant's weapon. To compromise with tyranny, is treason to our American ideals. No man has a right to play Providence with another man's liberty, no matter how noble or apparent the benevolence may seem under which the amiable tyrant would establish his despotism. No tyranny can be erected for the common good. For the power that comes with tyranny always breeds the arrogance of tyranny. And the arrogance of tyranny blinds men's eyes to the common good for which the tyranny was established. Tyrants are always tyrants—cruel, ruthless, unjust and selfish—no matter whether the tyrant is Hitler, or Stalin, either dictators of a plutocracy or the dictators of a proletariat.

Our American problem in this new epochal quest for justice which the machine age has brought us is a hard problem. We must secure for the common man who is willing to work, a certain minimum of welfare, our American standard of living below which no honest citizen need fall. He must be well housed, well clad, well fed, well educated and hold the opportunity for himself and his children to rise according to their individual qualities, to whatever height and distinction their talents entitle them. Let us call this security—the basic security of democracy. That minimum standard below which no American willing to work need fall, above which any American may rise according to his abilities. Certainly it may be attained, established and held unchallenged under democracy. Yet it is a difficult task. It may require drastic changes in our way of

life. But if we hold to our ancient rights, to the heritage of our democratic past, we can solve this problem. How, I don't know. I distrust anyone who pretends to know. Who knew all that was embodied in our Constitution before it was written? It grew out of the need of the moment.

The most dangerous enemy of democracy today is a man with a rigid plan for recovery or for reconstruction. For a man with a rigid plan is liable to feel that the adoption of his plan is more important for the moment than the retention of liberties which may endanger his plan. We may fairly consider any plan. America has established herself by keeping an open mind and never fearing failure. Indeed we have mapped our course in the long plebiscite of many failures. We groped our way almost leaderless after Yorktown and then wrote our Constitution. After Appomattox we stumbled in a morass of calamity and misrule for nearly three decades. But we did not turn to a dictator. Democracy saved us whole, the slow, sure wisdom of the people, the American spirit, whatever it is, rising triumphant out of disaster.

What is this American spirit? I think it is the spirit of a free man, a man protected in his freedom by the ballot box, by the right of free utterance in every form, by the right of trial by jury, by the writ of habeas corpus; those simple, ancient rights, guaranteed by our Constitution. Under them Americans can redress their wrongs. Their wrongs are real. To take one instance: The maladjustment of our income creates a major problem. Yet through our democracy, working for a century and a half, we have achieved a more equitable distribution of income than any other land and vastly better than our founding fathers knew. Nevertheless we must make some adjustment or it will be hard for liberty to survive in the machine age. Yet liberty must survive, if civilization persists. Tyranny is automatically self-destructive! Surely we can erect a distributive system as efficient as our system of production. Surely we can achieve economic justice without calling back the tyrants. Without democratic security there can be no self-respect. Without democratic liberty there can be no progress. There are no short-cuts, no royal roads to our goal.

We must feel our way, must grope along our path, trudging the zigzag course toward progress that humanity always has traveled. The vision of youth must chart the way. The day and time demand unshackled youth, youth with the divine fanaticism of its impudence, youth with the mad faith in its own ideals of justice, youth that knows no allegiance to party formula or tradition and to no leader who hesitates, palters, barters and betrays. Out of a vision of young men, then, in another era, old men, looking backward shall cherish their proud dream.

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